

The State
of
Black America:

*Political Prisoners
and
Prisoners of War and
the Prison Industrial Complex*

by Safiya Bukhari of the Jericho
Movement

This book is dedicated to:

Merle Austin Africa, Kuwasi
Balagoon, Andaliwa Clark, Ahmed
Evans, Teddy 'Jah' Heath, George
Jackson, Melvin 'Rema Olugbala'
Kearney, Albert 'Nuh' Washington
and all the brothers and sisters
who died behind the walls, while
struggling to be Free!!!

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The State of Black America:

Political Prisoners and Prisoners of War

and The Prison Industrial Complex

On January 21, 2001 a second political prisoner died in prison in New York State, the second in ten months. Teddy Jah Heath, former member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army died of cancer only two months after being diagnosed. He'd spent 28 years in prison. Nine months earlier, on April 28, 2000, Albert Nuh Washington, another former member of the Black Panther Party and Black Liberation Army died in prison of cancer. He had spent almost 30 years in prison. The first death sent shock waves through the political community. It sent shock waves because, while these political prisoners had been languishing in prison for almost three decades, no one had envisioned a life sentence actually being a death sentence. This became a reality that had to be confronted and dealt with. Jah's death, less than ten months later, makes it imperative that we move to correct this situation as swiftly as possible, because there is a pattern and practice of behavior developing with regards to our political prisoners that must be addressed. In addressing

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it, we must analyze the situation and develop a plan of action.

There are three schools of thought that exist in relations to who is a political prisoner. The history of our being captured/kidnaped/sold into slavery and shipped, packed like sardines, to what is now the United States serves as the basis for some believing and postulating that every Black person in prison is a political prisoner. They further argue that the institutionalized racism in this society, the lack of economic opportunities afforded the vast majority of Black people in this country, and the conditions under which we are forced to survive is political.

The history of the treatment of Black people in this country suggests the validity of this argument. The Constitution of the United States that allowed for Afrikans to be declared only three-fifths of a man, not human and without a soul, was the legal basis for slavery. We were beasts of burden. We could be beaten, used, mutilated and killed at will, with no fear of retribution or retaliation. A situation that continues today all across the United States with the racist murder of James Bird in Texas, the police beating of Rodney King in California, the racial profiling along the New Jersey Turnpike, and police brutality and police killings of Black people in New York City, Chicago, Detroit.

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Baltimore, Pittsburgh – all across the United States.

This institutionalized racism has resulted in the Black community developing a sub or underculture in order to obtain what they perceive to be basic necessities of life. The youth, after watching their elders struggle for the little they eke out and then barely having enough to go around, opt for the quick, fast, cash. What follows is a prison population made up of young Black men and women. Long sentences of 10-25 to life handed down by a criminal justice system that is weighed heavily against Black people.

The late Dr. Charsee McIntyre wrote about the "criminalization of a race". What she was talking about is the fact that Black youth have been depicted as criminals, even if they've never committed a criminal act - they are treated as criminals at all times. The simple fact of being Black is a crime. So those who believe that all Black people in prison are political prisoners have sound arguments to put forth. The problem that arises with this line of reasoning is convincing them that they are political prisoners and therefore rather than working against the good of the community they should be working in concert with the community in order to liberate the community.

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There was a high point in the movement in this country, during the '60s and '70s, when the movement was raging like wildfire across the United States. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Black Panther Party (BPP), the Republic of New Afrika (RNA), Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM), Junta of Militant Organizations (JOMO), and many other organizations were out there, agitating, organizing, educating the people for struggle. There is a saying that was extremely prevalent at that time, "Prisons are microcosms of society".

While this activism was occurring on the streets, it was being mirrored behind the walls. On the streets there was H. Rap Brown proclaiming that "racism is as American as apple pie" and "Burn Baby Burn". There was Stokely Carmichael demanding "Black Power" and Huey P. Newton organizing for "Self-Defense" and even James Brown was singing "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud" and "You Better Get Ready for the Big Payback". Behind the walls people who had gone to jail for social crimes were evolving into revolutionaries. George Jackson and the Soledad Brothers were part of a prison movement developing in California. The Angola 3 were part of the prison movement developing in Louisiana - prison chapters of the Black Panther Party developed. The Prison Unions were formed. Just as on the campuses in the streets where

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Black Studies were being fought for, inside the prisons Black Studies was also being struggled for and organized. In Illinois the New Afrikan Prisoners Organization was formed.

As the consciousness developed inside the walls, the powers that be sought to defuse it and destroy those who would change the character of their lives. Prisoners were denied parole, thrown in the hole for years, beaten, setup and given more charges. In the case of George Jackson and Ruchelle Magee, what started out as simple robbery charges ended up with George's murder by guards in San Quentin Prison and Ruchelle Magee having spent more than 40 years in prison. Hugo Pinell, the last remaining member of the San Quentin Six, is still in prison. Unquestionably, the brothers and sisters who become political inside the walls and are given longer sentences and are victimized by the state as a result of their politics are political prisoners.

There was a belief in the Black Panther Party about our organizing. We believed that we were capable of organizing where ever we were at. Therefore, if we ended up in prison, the only thing that had changed was the terrain. The conditions that made it necessary for us to exist remained the same and we still had a responsibility to educate, organize and agitate. The streets were seen as minimum security and the prisons maximum security. Both communities

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needed to be organized. If the people on the streets were organized, became political, were incarcerated as a result of the political activities and beliefs and were political prisoners, then the people who were organized, and educated in prison would become political prisoners also if their sentences were lengthened as a result of their political beliefs and affiliations.

Where this becomes a problem is when it comes to the international community recognizing these people as political prisoners under international law. But, that's a question of strategies and tactics, not definitions.

Finally, there are those prisoners whose arrest and subsequent imprisonment stem directly from their political beliefs, affiliations and activities in furtherance of their political beliefs and goals. These brothers and sisters who dedicated their lives to fighting for the freedom and liberation of people of Afrikan descent. Those brothers and sisters who looked at a situation that was untenable and made a decision to fight back through political organizing, agitation and education and were framed by government agencies because they were too effective at what they were doing. Criminal evidence was manufactured, charges were leveled and they were tried in criminal courts and sentenced to lengthy prison terms. Those brothers and sisters who, like Nat Turner and Denmark Vesey and

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those who fought wars of liberation before them, took up arms against the criminal government of the United States, were captured and, in defiance of international law governing the treatment of prisoners of war - were tried as criminals in the courts and given lengthy prison terms. There is no question that these brothers and sisters are political prisoners.

There is no question that support for political prisoners and prisoners of war should and must be an integral part of any movement for liberation. There is no question, that is, for people who have dedicated their lives to the struggle for freedom in this country and realize that it is not possible to talk about a movement for liberation if you fail to liberate people who are incarcerated as a result of that struggle for liberation. The problem is, I think, the Black community is not clear that it is involved in a liberation struggle. Just as there is different definitions for what a political prisoner is, there is a difference of opinion about whether or not there is a struggle for liberation going on. For those in the Black community who say there is no struggle for liberation going on inside the United States - there are no political prisoners inside U.S. prisons, only criminals and the burgeoning Black population inside the prisons and jails of America is a question of criminality.

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The year 1999 saw the release of eleven (11) Puerto Rican Independistas from prison by then President Clinton. In 1978, four (4) Puerto Rican Independistas were released by then President Jimmy Carter. On both occasions of these releases the entire Puerto Rican community, regardless of where they stood on the issue of independence for Puerto Rico, came together and demanded the release of their political prisoners. The religious community, the elected officials, the educators, the business community, the community activists, the average person on the street. They may not have agreed with the tactics used by the independistas, but there was no question that they were independistas and not criminals. There was also a consistency of support... of building ... of organizing around these political prisoners.

Thirty years, and more, after our political prisoners were captures and incarcerated, they are still in prison. When they went to prison there was a organized movement in existence all across the country. Their names were known inside the community, their organizations were heralded as champions of the community and people were flocking to join and align themselves with them. Today, former Panther Romaine Chip Fitzgerald Imprisoned in 1968, is still in prison in California. He's partially paralyzed after suffering a stroke and few people even remember what he looks like or that he's still there.

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The struggle has indeed come full circle. When we were brought to the shores of the United States to function as chattel on the plantations of the South and in the drawing rooms and sweatshops of the North it was done under the color of law. Today, under the color of law, a new slavery is in effect and our brothers, sisters and children are being kidnaped off the streets and herded into the prisons of America as chattel slaves. Prisons are private plantations run for profit. Our community is the new source of cheap/slave labor for these plantations.

The nearly 2 million people in prison in the United States represent employment opportunities for areas of the country where factories and manufacturing concerns have left and, with NAFTA and GATT, have moved to Mexico and other areas outside the United States. It also means lots of profits from cheap labor sources for some of these same multinational corporations who contract with prisons for cheap prison labor. This cheap prison labor comes directly from the 'war on drugs' that is being 'fought' by the government against the Black community. It is no accident that the vast majority of the people going to prison are low level drug dealers and users from the Black community and they are being sent to prison for extraordinary sentences, while the real traffickers are getting rich and eluding prison sentences are receiving short sentences.

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During the economic down spiral of the 70s and 80s in the United States, the only industry that was showing a profit was the prison industry. It was during this time that the reality of the dollars that could be made on prison labor began to take root. The Cold War was ending and a new source of economic growth had to be found.

Racism had been used as a tool, in the first round of slavery, to justify the use of Afrikans as slave labor. This time around it is 'fighting crime' or 'getting tough on crime' that is being used. The fact that being Black has been made synonymous to being a criminal or having the capabilities of committing a criminal act through the well thought out and orchestrated 'criminalization of race' is the new vehicle for justifying the increasing number of Blacks in prison and their use as cheap labor in the burgeoning prison industrial complex. What used to be the plantations of the south is now prisoners in South Carolina made lingerie for Victoria Secrets, prisoners in Washington State wrapping software for Microsoft, blue jeans in Oregon, Texas prisoners making electronic circuit boards for IBM. What is apparent here is that jobs that were not available to the community while they were on the streets - not in prison, are available now that they are in prison. They will be available as long as the cost/labor is cheap. Even the former President Clinton, who the Black

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community supports despite his Welfare Reform Act, gutting of Habeas Corpus, and Omnibus Crime Bill oversaw the incarceration rate for Black people rise from 3,000 per 100,000 people to 3,620 per 100,000 people during his administration.

The prison industrial complex does not just cover those who are behind bars. It is also made up of those who are on parole, probation and community service. Two million people are behind bars in the United States. Another 4.5 million are on probation and parole. Roughly half of these people are Black. With felony convictions, no matter how non-violent, comes a loss of voting rights, and, in some states, the ability to own property. That's how complex this situation is. Technically, the only thing we lost with the emancipation proclamation is our chains on - these chains have returned with the prison industrial complex.

The government of the United States had a plan to do this to us and acted according to that plan. In the FBI COINTELPRO documents issued in 1968 they were clear that their intentions were to make it clear to our youth that it was better to be anything, even a drug dealer, than to be a revolutionary. How did they do this? They also spelled the process out in their memorandums. They first waged a campaign of disinformation. Letter writing campaigns to

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newspapers, families, political personages calling revolutionaries criminals and thugs. Planting stories in newspapers to this effect. False arrests on criminals charges that vilified political activists.

Out right murders of political activists ie. Fred Hampton and Mark Clark - infiltrations and long prison sentences. Finally, the drugs being sent into our communities.

With the removal of organizations like the Black Panther Party, SNCC, RNA from the forefront of the movement through a myriad of methods, the community was once again open to the drugs infestation that took place. With a sleeping community those in prison as a result of those struggles were virtually on their own and forgotten.

I remember sitting in the back room of the Harlem office of the Black Panther Party on Seventh Avenue and listening at political education class while Mao Tse Tung's *Red Book* was being discussed. This particular day the passage under discussion was *Tell no lies and claim no easy victories*. I interpreted that to mean, go to the people, organize the people, work among the people and tell no lies about what we want and what we've done and what we have accomplished.

This lesson, *Tell no lies and claim no easy victories*, has been the cornerstone of my

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understanding of what this struggle is suppose to be about. If we take the *Tell no lies* approach to organizing, then we take the time out to build a foundation for a movement that is destined to bring us the victory we say we're fighting for. There would be no need to organize separate programs to educate the community to the existence of political prisoners because as we work to organize rent strikes and take control of abandoned buildings to create decent housing in our community through our sweat equity we would be talking while we're working about how Abdul Majid and others who organized tenant associations in the East New York and Brownsville sections of Brooklyn such as the Oceanhill Brownsville Tenants Association. While we're organizing around the issue of quality education that teaches our true history and role in this society we could talk about Herman Bell and Albert 'Nuh' Washington and their work with the liberation schools. While we're organizing food co-ops and other survival programs we can talk about Sundiata Acoli, Robert 'Seth' Hayes and all the other political prisoners and prisoners of war who worked in the Free Health Clinics, the day care centers and went to prison as a result of their active participation in organizing efforts around issues that directly affected the Black and oppressed communities.

Because our 'movement', for lack of a better word, has deteriorated to the point that the

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majority of our organizing is done through demonstrations, rallies, conferences and press conferences, the only way we feel we can talk about the issue of political prisoners is when we drag them out for show and tell time or when we need to legitimize what we're doing. This raises the question, "Are we serious about struggle? or Are we just profiling?" If we're not serious then we need to let our political prisoners off the hook and tell them to "Do what you think is best for you!" If we are serious then we need to stop ego tripping, stop profiling, stop rabble rousing and get down to the serious work of organizing. Talk is cheap, action is supreme!

Political prisoners didn't become political prisoners out of a vacuum. They went to prison, for the most part, as members of political formations. The majority of these brothers and sisters are serving upward of 25 years to life, Zolo Azania and Mumia Abu Jamal, are facing death. At the time the majority of these people went to prison there was a thriving movement on the street. They are sitting there now and the movement is totally fragmented and in a state of disarray. They are aging. Their health is deteriorating. They are being abused. They, like Kuwasi Balagoon, Merle Austin Africa, Albert Nuh Washington, and Teddy Jah Heath, dying in prison. Only two of our political prisoners, Geronimo ji jaga after serving 27 years, and Dhoruba Bin Wahad, after serving 19 years, have

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been released through the courts. None have ever received clemency or pardons. A final word, to our political prisoners, we used to know that prison was a microcosm of society. That is, we recognized the truism that the conditions of the people that came through the doors of the prison reflected the state of the society without. If you think back to what was happening on the streets at the time you were incarcerated and the activities that were going on among the prisoners in the institutions and compare that to what the people who are coming into the institutions are talking about and doing now you can deduce for yourself the state of the movement today. Just as we have a job to do out here, you have a job to do in there. Being in prison does not release you of your obligations to educate to liberate - some of you seem to have forgotten that. What being in prison does is change the venue from which you organize - change the playing field.

I remember another class that took place in the Harlem office of the Black Panther Party. This lesson had to do with the 10-10-10 Program. This was a lesson on organizing. We had to learn the 10-Point Program and Platform of the Party. We had to learn the 26 rules of the Party. We had to learn the 8 Points of Attention and the 3 Main Rules of Discipline. We had to learn the motto and Primary Objective, then internalize all of it. We had to learn and internalize it for the day when the offices would no longer be open

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and available to us. We had to learn it for the day when we would be on our own without other Panthers so that we could carry out the tasks of the revolution. Once we internalized these teachings we were ready to go out and organize. The theory was that if each one of us organized ten people, and those people organized ten people, and those people organized ten people - the third group, if each one of them organized 10 people, would number 10,000 people. It's a time consuming method of organizing, but it's tried and true. This was the approach to organizing that I used in my section when I was in the Party. During the time I was incarcerated in Goochland, Virginia the people that were in my section in the community were the ones who stood by me and sent me packages and cards and were there waiting when I was released from prison in 1983.

Organizations come and go, but we have to create within our people the spirit of struggle. We have to build a movement to liberate our people. The issue of political prisoners is part of that movement that we are building and in building that movement we must understand that this is not a separate issue. It is an integral part of that movement, it can't be put in front of the movement and can't be an after thought. It must be woven into the very fibers. We have to change the dynamics of how we deal with the issue of our political prisoners - Organize,

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Educate, Liberate to FREE OUR POLITICAL
PRISONERS AND PRISONERS OF WAR!!!

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